

# Rusin Birth and Baptism Customs, Traditions and Superstitions

The customs, traditions and superstitions can vary from village to village. Those written about in this article are from Saris County – Bardejov region in present day Slovakia. They are taken from a 1995 Greek Catholic Union Magazine article, “*Rusin Customs, Traditions and Superstitions At the Birth and Baptism of Children*”, by Michael Roman and a Fall, 1985 Carpatho-Rusin American article, “*Folk Customs of Carpatho-Rusyns Birth and Baptism*” by Mykola Musynka.

## Birth

Childbirth was connected with a number of customs. Normally, it took place at home with the assistance of a babka or povitucha, a midwife. When the childbirth was difficult, all the locks in the household were unlocked and all knots were loosened. If this was not effective enough, the woman was massaged, bathed in an extract of chamomile, given wine or walked around the house, or even shaken.

Immediately after the birth, the midwife sprinkled the child with consecrated water and laid it on a sheep’s skin so that it would be healthy.

## Baby’s First Bath

Great importance was placed on the child’s first bath. When the baby was bathed by the midwife for the first time, the parents would:

- Throw a coin in the water in the hope the child would become wealthy
- Lay a book and a pen next to the tub in the belief that it would arouse a love of learning in the child.
- If the baby was a girl, the parents would put a spindle, a needle, and a piece of thread into the water believing it would instill a love of work
- If it was a boy, they would place tools in the water hoping that the child would become a handyman or craftsman.

- Sugar and salt were added to the water with the expectation that the child would grow to be a good, sweet and compatible human being respected by his or her peers.

When the bathing was over, the midwife usually made little “corrections” of the imperfections in the child’s appearance. She would shape the head, straighten the legs, and make a dimple on the chin and on the cheeks. To make sure there was not a bone out of joint she would bring the child’s knee to his elbow on each side of his body.

Then the midwife would dress the child in a new shirt, or wrap it in a diaper and give it to members of the household and relatives to be held and kissed as a sign of welcome, after which the mother received the baby.

The midwife continued giving daily baths to the child until and including the day of baptism.

## Naming

There are several traditions surrounding the naming of the child. In some areas the first child was usually named for the father or mother. The girl’s name was usually determined by the father. In other families you see a pattern especially among the females – the first born female was Marija/Mary, then Hanna/Anna, Olena/Helen. Common male names were Jurij, Mychajlo, Petro, Ivan and Mykola. The most common female names were Marija, Hanna, Kateryna, and Paraska. Also common was naming the child after the saint’s day closest to the day on which they were born. In some villages children’s name’s days were celebrated rather than their birthday. Some Rusins even forgot their actual date of birth and when coming to the United States gave their date of birth as their name’s day.

## Baptism and Chrismation - Krestiny

The child was usually baptized two or three weeks after its birth or sooner if it was sick. The godparents would bring a child’s shirt (krizmo), a cap, and

and a piece of linen to the baptism. Into the piece of linen they would put a gift of money in hopes that the baby would become a rich adult. In other villages a piece of garlic and bread were placed in the linen. The child was brought to the baptism by either the midwife or the godmother. Sometimes the child was taken out of the house not through the door, but through the window, in order to “outwit” the “unclean spirits.”

Prior to the departure, in some households an egg and a prayer book were placed in the threshold so that the child would become as firm as the egg and a good Christian. When the child was at the baptism, its cradle was filled with bread so that the “vacancy” would not be filled by the “unclean spirits.”

The baptismal-chrismation ceremony usually occurred on a Sunday forenoon or afternoon at the Greek Catholic or Eastern Orthodox Church. The ceremony in either church is very similar and symbolic of the Rusin’s Christian faith. After the baptism, the baptismal group returned to the child’s home where they were welcomed. Festivities began with a prayer and a toast. Most of the guests not only brought gifts for the baby but also food and liquid refreshments to be enjoyed by all. Following the feast came the singing of appropriate folk songs.

### Vyvodki – Churching

Another very significant custom was the Mothers “vyvodki/vyvid” – churching. This was the first time the mother left her after-birth confinement and went to church. When the mother had given birth for the first time, she was accompanied to the ceremony of the vivid by the midwife or mother-in-law. If the child was not the first-born, the mother would go to the ceremony by herself with the child. The mother would put on a certain article of clothing inside out and hid a piece of garlic and a piece of bread on her. This was done, as she believed, to prevent her from becoming bewitched by an “evil eye”. At present this ceremony is usually connected to the baptism.

## Baptism and Chrismation Ceremony

This is the ceremony of Baptism and Chrismation in an Orthodox Church. The ceremony is similar in the Byzantine Catholic Church. However, local church customs can vary.

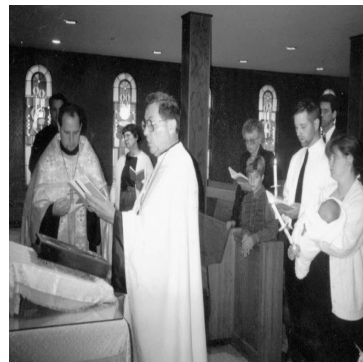


The mother stands in the vestibule of the Church holding the child. The priest prays for the mother on the fortieth day after childbirth.

### The Exorcism — Renouncing Satan



The godparents hold the child in the vestibule. The priest breathes gently in the form of a cross over the mouth, brow and breast of the child.



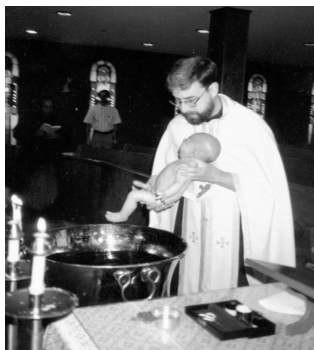
The Priest leads the sponsors with the child into the Baptistry. Lighted candles are given to the sponsors and prayers are said.



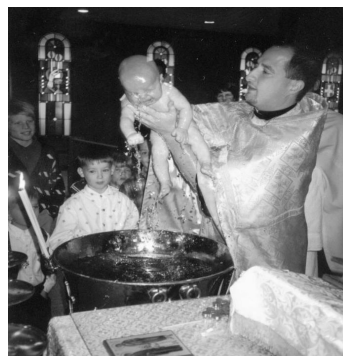
### The Anointing

The priest anoints the baby. He dips his two fingers into blessed oil and traces the sign of the cross on the child’s forehead, breast and shoulders, ears, hands and feet.

### The Baptism



Holding the child upright and facing toward the East, the priest immerses the child in the baptismal water three times.



### Chrismation

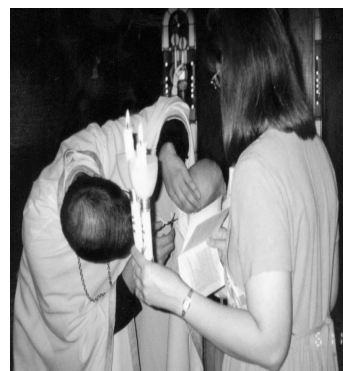
After the child is Baptized it is placed in a white cloth.

The priest dips a brush into the Holy Chrism and anoints the newly-baptized baby, tracing the Sign

of the Cross on the forehead, the eyes, the nostrils, the lips, on both ears, the breast, the hands and the feet.

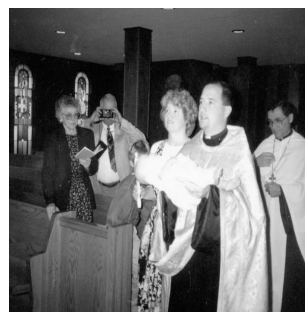


The Priest then leads the godparents and child in a circular procession around the Baptismal Font.



### Tonsure

Taking scissors, the priest cuts the hair of the child in the form of a cross. Cuts 3 locks which is an offering symbolizing strength.



### Churching

After the Baptism has been performed, the Mother and child again retire to the Vestibule. The priest comes to them, and carries the child to the door of the Sanctuary. After reciting a prayer the priest places the child on the floor for the mother to accept it. The child has now been accepted into the church.



# Rusin Midwife

By Karen Varian

Susan (Mlinar) Super delivered approximately 2500 children in the Minnesota Rusin Community of Northeast Minneapolis between the years of 1912 and approximately 1940 and never lost a mother. This is a remarkable achievement in child delivery.

Susan Mlinar was born in 1873 in the Rusin village of Stebnik in what is today Northeastern Slovakia. She married Nicholas Super (Cuper in Rusin) in 1891 in Bridgeport, Connecticut. Their first seven children (Mary-died in infancy, William, Nicholas, Helen, George, Mary and Anne) were born in Bridgeport, Connecticut. Sometime between 1903 and 1905, the Supers moved to Minneapolis. Their last three children (Harry-died at age 3, Sophie, and Harry) were born in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

Her husband, Nicholas, died in 1909. Ms. Super was left with eight children between the ages of 3 ½ months to 16 years old. Several years later, in 1912, at the age of 39, Susan (Mlinar) Super traveled to Chicago to learn how to become a midwife. Ms. Super was a member of St. Mary's Orthodox Cathedral until her death in 1950.



Susan Super, Chicago 1912

A number of the Rusins in Northeast Minneapolis remember Ms. Super or remember hearing stories from their parents, aunts, uncles, brothers or sisters. This includes:

- Ms. Super bathed the baby for the first time and usually came for at least a week after the child was born to bathe the child.
- Ms. Super always brought her little black bag to the house when she came to deliver a child. Some of the children thought that babies came from her little black bag.

- Some children were named by Ms. Super because the family had so many children and couldn't think of any more names.

Ms. Super was an amazing Rusin woman and a lot about her is still unknown. For example, it would be interesting to know:

- What was she paid to deliver a child?
- What type of training did she receive? Did she have to be licensed?
- How many of the children she delivered were Rusin? (I would guess most of them)
- How many of the children she delivered are still alive today? (I know she delivered my mother, her 5 sisters, and a brother that are still alive today)
- How many children did she really deliver? And was that unusual for the time?
- Who was the first and last child she delivered?
- When did she deliver her last child?

If anyone has anymore information about Susan Super or midwifery during these times please contact us.



"Super Family"  
Back row (left to right): Bill, Helen, Nick, George;  
front row: Anne, Sophie, Susan Super, Mary, Harry (on Susan's lap)

(con't from page 5) Chorwat, Cymbal, Danio, Dargaj, Filo, Filak, Gambol, Goga, Haluska, Horhota, Hudak, Ihnat, Jaroszczak, Kalyn, Kania, Kocisko, Kicinka, Klymak, Korbik, Kostelcj, Kuruc, Lacyk, Lysyj, Macica, Madiar, Macko, Ordas, Pagacz, Piricz, Pindo, Pelak, Poliwka, Prokop, Rusnaczko, Snapkko, Suszko, Slepak, Szeremeta, Snajder, Szevec, Siwanycz, and Zupko (the spellings of many of these names have been "Americanized" throughout the years). Some of the descendents of these original founders still live in the Minneapolis area and attend St. John's. Others have lost contact with the Church and their Rusin heritage. Others are unsure of their heritage or now identify themselves as Slovak or Ukrainian.

With the loss of religious unity among the Rusins and the Rusin Churches becoming denationalized over the years, it has been left up to the families to maintain and pass on their ethnic heritage. Most families when coming to America wanted to be American and their ethnicity was not stressed. This took a toll on the Rusin Community in Minnesota. In the 1980's, Larry Goga who from his own experiences of not knowing much about his Rusin heritage, formed a group calling itself the Rusin /Cultural Awareness Group. This group was later to become our "Rusin Association" and was the first Rusin cultural organization in the United States to be independent of the Church.

#### Bibliography

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